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Book Review: *Europe and Northern Ireland's Future: Negotiating Brexit's Unique Case* by Mary C. Murphy, Agenda Publishing, 2018, pp. 1-173, £16.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-78821-030-0

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## **Review**

The UK's decision to leave the EU represents a critical juncture for the UK and its constituent parts highlighting the political, socio-economic, ideological, geographic and demographic divisions. The Northern Ireland electorate voted to remain in the EU (55.8%) - a mandate which is directly at odds with the UK-wide preference to leave the EU. In addition, the political turbulence of 2017; the suspension of Northern Ireland's devolved institutions followed by Northern Ireland Assembly elections and an early UK general election (and the subsequent Confidence and Supply Agreement between the Conservative Party and the Democratic Unionist Party in order to aid the Conservative party form a minority government) added an unexpected dimension to the question of how to deal with Northern Ireland during Brexit negotiations and after the UK's withdrawal from the EU. It is this context - the uniqueness of the situation of Northern Ireland – in which this book is grounded.

Writing first in 2014, Mary C. Murphy was one of the first scholars to engage the study of Northern Ireland politics directly with broader debates about European integration and European governance. Four years later, in *Europe and Northern Ireland's Future: Negotiating Brexit's Unique Case*, Murphy engages with a considerable set of empirical data in order to examine in exceptional detail the political, economic and societal dynamics that Brexit has imposed on Northern Ireland.

The strength of this book is the extensive historical range employed in its analysis. The Northern Irish peace process was framed by EU membership both for Ireland and the UK which initiated a period of regional economic revival and political stability. As Murphy argues, while there has been some success in establishing devolved institutions and improving community relations, Northern Ireland is a region in transition which faces continued economic, political, security and social challenges. The process of reconciliation and community integration is slow and the challenges are both complex and multifaceted.

Using Galtung's (1990) 'negative peace' thesis as the theoretical framework this analysis argues that the persistent disagreement and tensions contribute to the ongoing polarization between the two communities in Northern Ireland and that the process of conflict management and resolution is both long-term and imperfect. As a consequence, "the tenuous nature of the local settlement, future peace, prosperity and stability may be derailed by unexpected and unanticipated forces. Brexit has the potential to be one such force" (pg. 3).

Chapter one addresses devolution in Northern Ireland and the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement however it primarily focuses on the relationship between Northern Ireland and the EU. Murphy posits that this relationship has been largely low-key and uncontroversial with the approach to EU matters based on a pragmatic form of engagement rooted in economic self-interest. However, violent conflict and imperative domestic political concerns prevented profound engagement with the EU. As European integration progressed Northern Ireland participated in the Single European Market and received financial assistance through

EU structural funding which gave increased visibility to the EU. However, increased visibility did not equate to convergence of EU perspectives and positions of the political parties.

While the EU did evoke difference and division, EU issues were not politicized and rarely had a polarizing effect on the Northern Ireland administration. Until the 2016 referendum. Chapter Two examines how Northern Ireland's 'negative peace' environment was receptive to the dynamisms that Brexit unleashed. The chapter examines how the EU is now of issue salience in Northern Ireland with a shared understanding across both communities that Brexit is problematic for Northern Ireland with many of these problems heralding an economic dimension (pg. 65).

The preceding chapter examines the extent to which Northern Ireland will be affected economically by Brexit and details the interplay between politics and economics in a divided society. The analysis determines that the possibility of economic decline as a consequence of Brexit "threatens not only Northern Ireland's economic future but also its political, social and constitutional stability" (pg. 96). Brexit produces a collision between Northern Ireland's introverted politics and its political economy which limits both the political *and* economic gains of the peace process.

Chapter Three addresses the key issue of who speaks for Northern Ireland and outlines how Brexit in Northern Ireland became intertwined with the constitutional issue. Murphy states that the absence of a strong Northern Ireland voice as a consequence of the mistrust between the political parties coupled with the 'negative peace' environment and the politicization of Brexit has resulted in Northern Ireland being on the periphery of transformative events in British history (pg. 121).

In the final chapter Murphy examines with forensic detail the options for Northern Ireland's future outside of the EU proposed by the UK government (a Comprehensive Free Trade Area pg. 125), by political parties in Northern Ireland (see p.gs 127-137) and by the EU (p.gs 137-140). What is evident from the analysis in this chapter is that the UK government "faces hard and unpalatable choices in dealing with its Brexit outlier" (pg. 153).

Overall, this is an exceptional piece of academic work. The book is a welcome addition to the literature on the politics of Northern Ireland and to Brexit in particular. Murphy's considerable scholarly knowledge of the politics on the island of Ireland and EU governance allow for the systematic qualitative research evidenced throughout this book. In turn, this analysis produces a significant, comprehensive and timely account of how to negotiate the unique case of Northern Ireland as well as determining the future relationship between Northern Ireland and the EU.

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